

Testimony of Lizanne Cox
Director of Common Ground High School,
358 Springside Avenue, New Haven, CT 06515
Testimony submitted to the Appropriations Committee
March 1st, 2011

Honorable Chairs, Members of the Appropriation Committee;

Thank you for the opportunity to share our experience at Common Ground High School, and to ask for your support during this year's budget process. We understand that Connecticut has hard choices to make. As you help make these choices, we hope you will consider the hard choices that Common Ground, and all of our state's charter schools have already been forced to make over the last 3 years as a result of flat funding. If funding priorities remain the same we will be making even harder choices in the year to come - choices that will directly impact our ability to provide the education and support our students need and deserve. My hope is that the story of our school will help you to do what it takes to ensure that education remains a priority in our state and the hard work of our students receives the recognition it deserves.

At Common Ground, as at many Connecticut charter schools, our students have made extraordinary strides despite extraordinarily limited available resources. While our colleagues at New Haven Public Schools spend more than \$14,000 per year per student, we start with the baseline of \$9300 from the State Department of Education. Even taking into account title funding we have received from the Federal government, we are able to invest \$3000 less per student than other public schools in New Haven. And yet, despite this enormous disadvantage, our students have made remarkable progress:

- In 2008, the percentage of our student scoring "proficient" doubled or nearly doubled in literally every subject area – increasing from 32% to 77% in reading, for instance.
- In 2009, we sustained these gains in every subject area, and gained an additional 10 points in science and math. As a result, Common Ground was the state's only high school to exit No Child Left Behind "in need of improvement" status in either 2008 or 2009.
- In 2010, our students made larger gains than their peers at every other Connecticut high school. In every subject, the percentage of students reaching State Goal either doubled or tripled. We sustained or increased student proficiency levels in every subject, as well. For the first time, Common Ground is outperforming the New Haven average in every subject, and outperforming the state average in reading.

Test score gains are not the only measure of our success. For three straight years, more than 93% of our students have been accepted to college. In the class of 2011, more than a third of our students plan to study environmental sciences or a related field in college. We are doing what we promised in our charter: creating the next generation of successful college students and powerful environmental leaders.

Progress like this is possible because of sustained, above-and-beyond supports for our students. Whether you arrive at Common Ground at 6:30 am or 5:00 pm, you will find teachers and students working together to achieve excellence. Walk into our classrooms, and you will see students doing genuinely challenging work, and teachers employing research-based effective teaching strategies, with everything aligned to academic standards.

Despite the progress we have made, we recognize that our work is far from done. Our students need to make even more significant strides. But if our state's charter schools continue to be underfunded, we simply will not be able to continue the progress we have made over the last three years. OUR STUDENTS DESERVE MORE.

Here is what we are facing: we are currently deep in the budgeting process for the 2011-12 school year. We have started with what we think our kids really need and deserve. We need to add Calculus, Physics, and AP Literature to the curriculum in order to keep pace with the dramatic educational progress our students have made. To reach students not yet demonstrating proficiency on state standards – and despite a 40% drop in ARRA funding for our after-school program - we need to continue the after-school supports that have made such a tremendous difference. Our teachers deserve at least a modest raise after two years of salary freezes – they are already paid far less than teachers in the New Haven district. At our current funding level – which as you know has been flat for the last 3 years – this basic 2011-2012 budget projects a \$400,000 deficit. As a result, we are now looking at what we can and must cut. Do we provide fewer wrap-around services for our students? Offer fewer challenging course offerings? Smaller or maybe even no raises for teachers who for years have demonstrated both their commitment and their skill? Or perhaps we invest even less in maintaining our school facility –which is already far more crowded and provides far fewer amenities than other public schools. I strongly feel these are not choices we should have to make. OUR STUDENTS DESERVE MORE.

Here is the bottom line: We spend \$3000 less per pupil on our students than the New Haven Public Schools and yet we have outperformed them. We are not a failing school; we are a highly successful school. But flat funding is killing us. Costs have gone up. Funding has not. This cannot go on much longer. At some point, this becomes a simple issue of educational equity. As the educational leader of Common Ground, it is hard for me to look our students in the face, and tell them that their education is worth several thousand dollars less than is that of their peers at other public schools. My students - OUR STUDENTS - DESERVE MORE.

Thank you.

Liz Cox

Director

Common Ground High School